

Science for Environment Policy

Protest votes: why will some people not tell how much they are willing to pay for clean air?

What is the value of clean air? Answering such a question may be achieved by asking citizens how much they are willing to pay. However, some individuals give 'protest vote' responses to such questions. Recent research in EU countries found that the main reasons for this were because they felt that the polluters themselves or the government should be responsible for such costs.

'Externalities' are environmental or social welfare costs not directly borne by the manufacturer or consumer. Traffic pollution, for example, is related to externality costs that are not covered by the market prices of transportation, but must be borne by wider society. For instance, [air pollution](#) from traffic has been linked to increased risk of heart disease and traffic [noise](#) has been associated with high blood pressure and poor school performance in children.

Putting a price on such impacts is far from simple. One of the main methods is asking citizens how much they are willing to pay for environmental goods such as clean air and reduced health impacts.

However, studies have shown that some individuals give 'protest vote' responses to such questions, for example indicating that they are willing to pay nothing because they feel that the polluter should be responsible for any such costs. These are different from 'don't know' responses.

As part of the EU-funded [INTARESE](#)¹ project, researchers conducted a survey of 10 464 people in total from the UK, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands and Spain. Half of the participants received questions about traffic noise and the other half about traffic-related air pollution. Individuals were also asked what they would be willing to pay on an annual basis for the rest of their lives for avoiding, for example, more cases of children with reading difficulties.

Approximately 10% of responses were 'protest votes' with around a third (30% for air pollution surveys and 26% for noise surveys) of these giving the reason that the costs should be included in transportation prices. Another third (30% for air pollution and 33% for noise) believed that the government should pay all costs to reduce air pollution and noise. About one fifth were principally against putting an amount of money on health (20% for both air pollution and noise).

The likelihood of giving a protest vote was higher for women, and increased with age and decreased with level of education. Nationality also had an effect and individuals from Finland were less likely to respond with a protest vote. People who gave protest votes had higher concern for the environment and were more likely to disagree with the statement that the government was 'doing its best to reduce air or noise pollution'. They were also more likely to have a lower income.



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1. The INTARESE (Integrated Assessment of Health Risks of Environmental Stressors in Europe) project was supported by the European Commission under the 6th Framework. See: <http://www.intarese.org/>